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Main strategies of Internet-based Japanese language teaching and the associated risks

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Abstract

This study formulates two models of using Internet in classroom based Japanese language education. The models identified, the static model and the dynamic model, can be used in planning the strategy of introducing Internet as an educational medium in Japanese language classroom. Apart from elaborating the features of the models, and clarifying their relationships to recognized foreign/second language teaching approaches, we determine the risks, associated with Internet based Japanese language education and consider the ways to mitigate them.

Our study is backed by 2 surveys, and by qualitative and quantitative analysis of Internet search engine data and of a database of teachers' beliefs data. This study may be of value to Japanese language teachers and learners, education administrators and to designers of CALL software.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Over the course of human history, technology has played an important role in how language was acquired and learned. It applies both to first, and, particularly, to second, and foreign language study.

Within the European tradition, the Grammar-Translation method of foreign language teaching was associated with the media of pen, paper and printing press. For Middle Ages and Renaissance scholars, the languages of interest were the dead ones, and the objective was mainly bible study. As means of transportation were limited, there was little incentive to study living languages, and the teaching method had to be based on following grammar rules because they were the only available criterion of linguistic correctness.

The Industrial Revolution brought trade and migration. It also opened information flows between nations, and created incentives to acquire technical and cultural knowledge, expressed in foreign, yet living, languages. In the case of Japan, the impact of opening up to foreign technology and culture over Meiji and Taisho periods was so great, that some cultural and political figures seriously considered getting rid of Japanese language altogether, and switching to English and/or French (Ohno 1999; Gerbert 1997). The media options have also widened, as glass show windows, radio and movies became widespread (Gerbert 1997). As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, the Grammar-Translation method was criticized as not leading to fluency (or, indeed, minimal communication proficiency), and reform movement has resulted in the introduction of Direct Method, emphasizing communication in the target language.

In the middle of the 20th century, after the Second World War, the need to learn foreign languages continued to increase as technological developments were gaining pace and competition between nations was at its highest point ever. There were also huge advances in media technology, and thus in the ways language could be delivered. In particular, media technology was “democratized”; average schools could afford tape recorders, TV sets and, later, video recorders. This period is characterized by the introduction of the Audio-lingual method, based on behaviorist theory and heavily relying on sound equipment for the delivery of repetitive drills.

Chomsky's theory of natural grammars and the concept of language acquisition as construction, based on inborn natural ability have led to a strong criticism of behaviourist language learning theory in general and of the Audio-lingual method in particular. Starting from the seventies, the prevailing approach to language teaching (in western societies) is the Communicative approach and its numerous variations, such as the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning and Total Physical Response. Today, the stress is not on repetitive drills, but on communication between learners in the target language. Learners are allowed to make mistakes as they "construct" the target language, while going over a sequence of "intermediate grammars" and there is much more scope for individual work and for work in small groups, and the work is less assessment - oriented.

While superficially the change from Audio-lingual to Communicative approach might seem to be triggered by advances in theory rather than by technological advances, one could also attribute it to the changes in workplace organization. Post-industrial society relied more on creative work of individuals and small groups within organizations, and less on mechanical work of conveyor workers. Mechanical work could now be done by machines. This change in overall organizational philosophy, triggered itself by technological innovation, found its way into the foreign language classroom.

Right now, we are in the middle of enormous technological transformations, brought by the Internet technology. The Internet is a communication technology, working transparently over national borders. And, it is the most "democratic" technology ever: access is very cheap (at least, in all industrialized western societies), and all participants can potentially act both in receptive and in creative capacity. What are the implications for foreign language teaching and learning? Here are some examples:

A learner ...

... has access to effectively unlimited resources of up-to-date authentic target language materials

... can communicate with native speakers of the target language, or, at least, eavesdrop on native speakers' conversations

... can publish his work for everyone on the Internet to see and to comment on

A teacher

... can deliver material over the Internet, for remote asynchronous access from, essentially, anywhere

... communicate with students remotely and asynchronously

Is the advent of almost global Internet connectivity going to lead to a change in a prevailing approach to foreign/second language teaching? Many authors believe that Communicative approach is going to be enhanced and replaced by an approach based on Constructivism. In Constructivist language teaching, linguistic knowledge is constructed while students work on individual or group projects. Student autonomy is increased still further, as students participate in defining the projects, and thus, in defining the curriculum. The Internet serves as an ideal source of materials for the projects, as well as a communications medium. The teacher's role is the one of a facilitator.

While at each moment in history, a certain approach is considered to be the most "correct", in real practice approaches often coexist. For example, when using Audio-lingual method, while mostly the study is concentrated on practicing patterns to make them automatic, some theoretical explanation of the underlying grammatical phenomena can still be given, as in Grammar-Translation approach. A good teacher would, often unconsciously, mix different approaches to find the best combination for a specific teaching situation.

In this thesis, we maintain a view that teaching will remain necessarily eclectic; we consider the existing practice in the use of Internet in foreign/second language teaching and try to pinpoint trends, which would be indicative of successful strategies in the use of the Internet in language teaching in the future. By strategy we do not necessarily mean the use of a single language teaching approach, but rather possible combinations of approaches.

Primarily, we are interested in Japanese language teaching to learners with no knowledge of Chinese characters. On the other hand, we will often use information available on teaching other languages over the Internet, such as French (as we will see, there is more experience in teaching English, German and French over the Internet, than in teaching

Japanese).

The specifics of Japanese language is in its relatively steep learning curve. An English speaker already knows most of the French roots because of the similarity between the languages. Thus, an English speaker learning French can acquire reading ability and basic communicative ability very fast, which simplifies the use of Constructivist approaches, and the use of Internet based authentic materials. Much more has to be learned before an English speaker will be able to make sense of authentic materials in Japanese. Thus, a learner of Japanese would require more guidance, from a real teacher or from a CALL computer program.

Introduction of a new technology in an organization is always associated with risks. Risks may be apparent, such as when lessons break down completely because students spend all their time browsing sites, unrelated to the target language, or hidden, such as when Internet - based lessons are effective, but not effective enough to justify the investment made into the computer network infrastructure. If Internet-based teaching strategies are to be implemented, the risks are to be identified, and ways to mitigate them are to be found. In the current work we do not stop on defining strategies, but also make an attempt to identify risks.

Apart from the existing literature, devoted to the subject, both in printed form and on the Internet, the following sources of information are used.

Statistical information is obtained by using structured searches in google.com, the leading Internet search engine.

A database of teachers' beliefs about on-line teaching and learning, available in public domain, is analyzed directly.

A paper-based survey is conducted to collect information on the attitude of second / foreign language learners to Internet-based language study (participants studied a variety of languages, not exclusively Japanese).

An on-line survey targeted at Japanese language learners with a degree of Internet proficiency is conducted.

The rest of the thesis is organized as follows. In Chapter 2, the significance of the study is confirmed. The main strategies for the Internet use for Japanese language teaching are introduced tentatively.

In Chapter 3, we confirm the two main strategies by considering the underlying teaching methods and technologies.

In Chapter 4, we consider the risks associated with Internet use for Japanese language educations, and suggest ways to mitigate them.

Finally, Chapter 5 draws conclusions and outlines directions for further study.